

> **kill author**

a literary journal for the mostly alive

<http://killauthor.com>

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Issue Five: Paz



Name: Octavio Paz

Died: 19 April 1998, aged 84

Cause of death: Cancer

Quote: "Literature is the expression of a feeling of deprivation, a recourse against a sense of something missing. But the contrary is also true: language is what makes us human. It is a recourse against the meaningless noise and silence of nature and history."

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Letter from the editors

We were hungry. We spent the Winter Solstice stuffing ourselves while casting a wary eye in the direction of religious observance, but still we hadn't had enough. We ate hot food, sharp spices, bitter sauces, the occasional dessert. Our mouths and our bellies suffered because of our insatiable greed. We kept eating. The roof caved in.

We found ourselves on our knees. We weren't praying. We slurped water from the bowl, licked the porcelain clean, inhaled our own fumes and choked. Now we're back for more.

There's been no flash in the pan. We haven't had our fingers burned. We never doubted we'd get to this, our number five. We only worried that we might have to start publishing shopping lists, credit card bills, maybe a last will and testament or two along the way. We didn't. We haven't. That's thanks to you and the words you've sent us. You took a gamble on the new face in town when you could have given us nothing but suspicious glances and dismissive gestures, and we truly appreciate it.

*

We like: You. Every single writer featured in this latest edition – and not forgetting those in the four previous issues – offers up work that really sizzles with the verbal innovation and imaginative ideas we value so highly. Read the whole thing from virtual cover to virtual cover, because there's no way we can pick out individual names (though we will just add that we enjoy Howie Good's submission emails and responses. He's so polite. A real gentleman. He was obviously much better brought up than we were. We need him to teach us some manners).

We're thankful: That we're not receiving so many stories set in bars. With drunk people. Deadbeat drunks who somehow rise above their alcohol intake to reach a level of eloquence and philosophical insight that defies the reality of what we see in most bars on an average night.

We don't like: Nature poetry. We've recently been sent far too many verses about trees and meadows. Rabbits and deer. Lions and tigers and bears, oh my. Animal Planet has taken over our inbox. We're hoping for sudden extinction, and we'll fight back with hunting pistols if we have to.

We're feeling better about: Childhood. Families. Parents. We're still seeing more childhood reminiscences than we'd like, but they don't feel so much like a cheap excuse for therapy now. We were surprised when we realised that, somehow, our selections for this issue seemed to feature fathers and mothers and sons and

daughters at almost every turn. But we're far from apple pie wholesome, and still prefer the family trees that come across like the Waltons' weirder cousins.

We won't: Be getting an accompanying blog or tumblr, even though we're told we should. It's nothing personal, but in the two months between issues we like to disappear and work on the next one without too many distractions. We just don't keep our fingers on the lit scene pulse. If you want to know who's written what and where you can read it, there are many other places that can tell you those things, and who know what they're talking about much better than we do.

We've been reading: The fortnightly thought waves emanating from the minimalistic Matchbook magazine, the words twisting and pouring their way out of the tenth Mud Luscious, and the always beautiful, always mysterious Robot Melon. In print, we're looking forward almost indecently to the first issue of Artifice.

*

We hope you enjoy Issue Five of > kill author. It's got more wonderful words than we ever thought we could squeeze onto our pages, with phrases that it's impossible to stop rolling round our tongues because they just demand repeating. And because we think it's a collection that might need some time and thought away from the glare of the computer screen to fully take in, this time out we're experimenting with also offering a PDF version (you're reading it now) for you to download and print out if you prefer, or put on your Kindle if you're in tune with that technology. Let us know what you think.

Keep pulling down those statues,
> **kill author**

Before Hunger, Before Rain

Adam Braffman

We drink, swarmed by flies and gnats.
Streetlamps thrum a glow that hits
the film of leaves, flushes the bole
to lime. Shadows break at trunks
and pass. Behind us are sheets

creased and flecked with skin. That
is the quiet, there. Here are wine stains
on your teeth, now strands of spit,
now flights of bats from towers. Days before
you told me how your father

killed your sister's dog, your brother
shot two doves from a tree. So we're
killers. So talk of murder and meat.
What are tears when moths beat
our lashes to dust, when eyes

won't shut? The back of a hand knows.
Here, mouths slake and mold. Remember,
we have been other. We have been the snap
of a flame and oil dripping from an oar.
We have been coal and ash

and rising. The quiet between our sighs
is war. Beneath our thighs, bones drone
with wanting, pray for the savor of wind.
Did you know our throats are flutes? You say.
Play, play, you say.

Dark Water, Hole In The Sky

Adam Braffman

*I float among
Lonely animals, longing
For the red spider who is God.*
-James Wright

Just look at the trees,
bare as birth. How much clearer we see
the nests. I watch from the grass a skein of geese
that did not make it far enough south. I touch
maple leaves, brittle as herring bone. *I won't
come anymore*, the trees

cry. My palms meet and then
open. I pick up a leaf and look at our veins
and see telephone wires, harp-strings, baleen:
millions of filtered krill. The sky
is a sheet I cannot
throw. I walk

slow. There is the building where the old man
sits at a desk and touches his scalp,
his few hairs spar and twine, then his finger
points a spire. I lie on backs of spiders
chest up; the ants clear the aisle.
There is nothing in the sky

but a hole like the pupil of an eye. The tires
move over the road; I drag my knuckle across the wall:
the scrape of a keel, a wake of skin. *Hooked worm,
you will throb for three days*. Hardening on the flesh,
there is the heart. There is all
we know of it.

Tonight the folds
will close over me. My scabs
will rub against the sheets, and her hand.
In my dream, I will not die
by water. I will die
upon the wing.

Entropy Triptych

Adam Braffman

1. Allegory of Youth

—A scythe that bends to plaited hair
means nothing: but look, child,

to the fork-haired chin, the wide
neck, shell-white and sheen,

open as a cloud-shorn noon:
one palm holds all the air

but for the man whose hourglass song
whistles the bones to flutes,

tells how some father stood
with staff on a wind-whipped roof,

the tower from where one word
fell: a saliva droplet, a petal—

2. Loss of Consciousness

—First the pill and now
the doubling: a look wrenched

wide as a howl, tongues
the cerebellum, rasp breath

bellling like a slit bulb: this light
that licks the knob skull spikes

the larynx, with its shadow
widens the mouth, leaks

and ribbons the screen:
one worm to rim hemispheres:

this hat of skin bleached black,
the word snake-forked, a sight

only the image sees: O soul
that quit some burlap lung,

how warps the mirror
when the face turns other—

3. Cadmium Red Over Black

—Ruddy sun, ashen
ground, this blot beams

like a vein-webbed eye:
scathed bone, marrow-hollowed:

the black throat cries,
grizzled around the lips,

a ball of grass thrown
into the palm of a fire:

spears sparked and sry
darken, the shadow of which

is a boy's navel: birth-light,
burst from black, boils red:

the sun's breath skims the water-face
and the looker spins some fable—

Escape Artists Never Die

Adam Gallari

Whenever Dawn thinks of her, she is Dear because it's the language that creates the illusion; it's the language that misdirects, that denies the implication that 'mother' assumes carrier and caregiver alike. For Dawn, to deny that duality is to say we may be connected, Dear, but we owe each other nothing.

And now, as the shadows creep between the skyscrapers and another night falls on Manhattan, Dawn paces past the crinkled copies of *The New Yorker* and the volumes of melancholic Czech poetry that lay scattered on the floor of her studio. Before, when the approach of evening made her anxious, she would get into her car and drive because there was something soothing in the familiarity of hand to wheel and foot to pedal, in the way the loop and curve of the road led her down tree-lined streets and past Fairmount Park, before the final bend revealed Mount Rubidoux framed against a horizon whose pinks and reds were like streaks of blood produced by the columns of cypress stabbing at the sky. And on those nights, with the California horizon bleeding before her, she'd turn the radio on as high as it would go and sing along to the kitschy hits of Cyndi Lauper and Debbie Gibson and Tiffany, secure that no one could hear her belt out lyrics that would remain trapped within the confines of a coup now sold to help finance an exodus from bubblegum pop, a wounded sky and the lightheartedness of youth.

If Dawn allows herself a weakness, it's that she thinks too much, too often about Dear. About the idea of her. About what it all means and how it all might have played out. Dawn thinks she might've been able to forgive Dear if Dear had been smart about it. If Dear had had a plan, a notion of things to come. If Dear had latched onto someone who might've been a ticket to greater comforts, greater excitements, greater things. But from the stories and pictures and rumors whose reality Dawn can never truly parse, she can only gather that Dear hadn't been smart, that she didn't have a plan, that she'd been fifteen and curious about the effect her body had on the boys around her, about the desire it aroused.

Dawn has never enjoyed the malaise of dusk; it's as though the slow transition from day into night invites a greater prospect of Dear coming to her, invading her thoughts and ravaging her mind, and without her coup she is defenseless, save for her books and the half empty bottles of wine stopped with corks that are swollen just enough to make their return to the bottle arduous. Dawn's broken enough necks to know to be careful, yet she still jams them down as though there is some joy in the prospect of the tinted glass snapping off in her hand. There is an awesome power in knowing she has the ability to break something, to damage and wreck at a whim.

Now, on these nights when restlessness overtakes her, Dawn abandons her books and her wine and heads south on Second Avenue. Moist air brushes against her cheeks and blows back her long hair. There's nothing to shield her. There are no

windows to close. There's no radio to switch on. No volume knob to amp up. She can't sing in public, and instead of song lyrics running through her mind there are pictures, images of Dear. Attempts to imagine how her mo—Dear—might've appeared. How those boys might have seen her: a nymph of the mid '80s with a short, pixy haircut, hoop earrings, an exposed midriff between a threadbare Ramones t-shirt and cut-off jeans so small that only the frayed, white fibers of sheared denim covered the inviting flesh of her tanned legs. If Dawn has been decadent, liberal with the amount of wine she's allowed herself, she tries to envision what she would have done in the same situation. She thinks she could have stayed, would have stayed, would have taken *it* as a *reason* to stay, but it's always easier to look back on a situation than to be drowned by it. From a distance proclamations ring truer, sound prettier, float more eloquently to the ears of the crowd. From the outside everything looks simpler, more alluring, and Dawn knows that she'd probably have done the same thing.

When she passes people on the street, hears parts of their conversation, broken phrases and parts of speech, Dawn doesn't like to think how a girl of seventeen, one without a high school diploma and means of her own, survived in a country whose language she didn't speak and whose customs were unknown to her, when she—Dawn—educated and capable, can barely exist in another part of her native country. And though Dawn is sure that there were more than enough waitressing, bartending and cleaning jobs to sustain Dear, she can't help but think that the reality is more sinister, more clandestine—perhaps, in a certain way, more brave. Because escape artists always seem to find a way to stay alive.

It's fitting, then, that the farther down Second Avenue Dawn walks, the more she thinks about it: that Dear went not to Paris, Rome, Barcelona or even Berlin, but that she went to Bohemia, that she settled in the lyrical, moody confines of Prague with its rivers and bridges and parks and churches: the capital of a people eager to return to a life of light innocence after years of Soviet oppression. To be immersed in a resurrection and renaissance simultaneously, to be free to expose publicly what had been boiling internally all along. To be in a place where it was okay to dance and to celebrate and to drink and to *fuck* because, at long last, one could. And it's fitting that, as Dawn wanders past the invisible border that brings her into Greenwich Village, where cobblestones line streets that no longer run straight, Dawn wonders if *she* was ever a topic of conversation, a phrase uttered freely and without fear while her moth—*Dear*—lay in the arms of some Czech man who had earned *his* right to frivolity with a woman who aged but never grew up. And when she passes the bars and the clubs where, in the shadows, kissing couples slide passionate hands over each other, Dawn wonders if Dear's allure lay in the idea that at any moment the person holding her might find themselves awash in a plume of smoke, suddenly grasping only air.

It's an image that makes her laugh, chuckle silently to herself, but that also tends to make her think of Bill. When she does, she allows him to stay with her for a handful of blocks. Bill, whose balding head was ringed by a fringe of white hair, who was old enough to be her father, her grandfather, whose lungs were filled with cancer, who asked her to accompany him on three-hour lunch breaks during which he deliberately made his way through half a pack of Pall Malls—always offering her

one before he pulled out another for himself, as though he needed company in something that resembled death—and how she always chastised him about his smoking like, she thinks, a mother, and how he responded with a smile: *Cancer, all the more reason.*

There are moments when she thinks he might have loved her: that, as long as she was there, the cancer was a joke, that his simple *Go* when she said, without quite knowing why, that she'd been saving up to move away to Manhattan and would have amassed enough to leave by the end of the summer, was evidence enough. She'd like to think that his telling her to leave expressed his affection, that it was love that propelled someone to push away that which they should have sought to keep. But, by that definition, Dear loved her more than humanly possible, because she continued to go and to go and to stay away and to give Dawn only a name that belied not that she was a mistake or a problem, but something full of optimism and promise. It's as though the language influences the situation, acts as the smoke and mirrors, makes everything easier to understand.

Because if it's the language that misdirects, then Dawn *let* the boy she met in the bookstore and who held the Seifert and Kundera and Skvorecky and whose shirt was too small and whose pants were too tight and whose mismatched assortment of garish shapes and colors harkened back to the fads of the '80s when clashing ensembles were *en vogue*, then she *let* him sleep with her. If it's the language that offers agency, she'd like to think that *she fucked him*, because it allows her to believe that she's in control and that, like those Czech poets who tell her *the silence after lovemaking resembles Death*, she too can be the type of woman capable of saying everything she needs to say with as much terseness, as much sparseness, as much simplicity as possible. That she could be the woman to tell them all that they were wrong; that as the warmth rose into her stomach and spread through the rest of her body, while she rocked back and forth with her fingers curled around the boy's shoulders and her nails dug into the skin of his back, she felt unmoored. Alive and ephemeral and capable of disappearing at any time. Because after it was over, Dawn remembers looking down at his closed eyes. How the still expression on his face and the paleness of his skin wrapped snugly around the lines of his ribs made him look fragile, frightened, made him look like something needing to be held. Which, she thinks, is why she didn't stay in the bed; why, instead, she stepped away from him, stared out of his window towards the building across the street and stood with her back to him, imagining how she might look when he opened his eyes—the secrets of her body half in shadow yet half illuminated by the faint light glowing in the corner of his apartment; why she just stood there thinking that if anything resembled death it wasn't the silence, and that if she had the chance, just once, she'd tell her mother what she missed most was being in a place where it was still possible to look up and see an uninterrupted sky.

Cognition

Adam Marston

These people have tried talking. They think it is an effective way to communicate. For personal reasons, they do not talk anymore. If one of them wants something, they bang their skulls together. The theory is that if their brains are closer together, a thought will transfer. If one of them needs something, they cry while doing this.

*

This man had a stroke. His mind is like a meteor: he can only think with craters. He has no short-term memory. This works because large enough holes swallow everything. The cat cries to go outside and he says, "I just let you out! Don't you remember? You have no memory, kitty!" This works because large enough holes swallow everything, even each other.

*

Under the tree in the front yard, there is a hole. When I look into it I think, *what could it have swallowed to grow so large?* I ask the tree to move and it laughs. I ask it what it thinks about the hole and it doesn't think about it because it doesn't have a brain. Now I dig up the roots and push the tree over. In the hole there is black. I shout *BLACK* into the hole. I shout *I AM A TREE* into the hole and realize too late. The hole is a pit. In it, there is every kind of pigeon. In it, an echo keeps itself company. I circle the pit like a wild animal. The tree says *I can make this make sense* every time I circle the pit.

Her Mother, His Father

Alan Rossi

1.

They drove through flat Iowa farmland, her family awaiting. Corn seemed a flat sea riding out to the horizon. Farms at first distant and small, all the same.

Iowa is a grid, she said. All right angles and straight lines.

Her body hummed with anticipation. The car dusted snow behind it on the country highway. Grain silos like mechanical growths disrupted the landscape. One of her ovaries was removed a month ago and a light seemed to go out of her. They were thirty, thirty-one. She thinned down to someone he didn't know, and his own fears awakened. He tried to leave. She called him a coward and he crawled back and took care of her. Her mother could not afford the flight to visit.

2.

When I was eight, my father sent our dog to his father, to the farm in Connecticut, he said. Missouri was so far away. I've told you this before. The dog had eaten a Gucci purse, a bottle of orange juice, and part of a sofa. My father was through. His father kept the dog in a barn. The dog ate beef scraps and escaped his chain often, returning bloodied with dead squirrels. I once cried after visiting that dog. My father sat silent, driving me home.

Oh, she said.

Years later my father said the dog ate a purse and shat a billfold.

3.

My family lives flatly, like how Iowa is, she taught him.

He'd seen for himself. Both grandparents stooped. Low to the ground so that the wind, when it swept, wouldn't sweep them away.

My mother is a blank of sadness, she said. Then she'll drink and tell you how she quit smoking after being in the hospital for four days with water in her lungs. She'll tell you that right after that, she dropped her second husband too. That the sickness cleared everything up. Just like that, she'll flick her wrist. Done. My mother will beam.

4.

My father taught me to box when I was ten, he said. He roped off a ring in the backyard, Ozark woods behind the house. When I was seventeen we fought in the kitchen then the laundry room over an older girl I was seeing. I walked out of the house after bloodying his eye and after he'd bloodied mine. The washing machine was upended somehow, soap and water on the floor. It's a memory I have remade relentlessly: I walked into the forest behind our house, down past the creek to the dirt road, with my eye bloody. I shivered with cold, went numb with it, in just a t-

shirt and jeans. My father found me on his ATV late in the night, snow falling. The world gone a beautiful black and white. That crisp snow. His warm hand around the back of my neck. He carried me to the ATV and gave me his coat and said my name over and over.

5.

My mother had me at eighteen in Arizona, she said. The heat, the heat was something beyond heat. My mother worked on a reservation, Navajo. When it was take your kids to work day, the people on the res stared at us. Red hair. My mother told me it was because I was beautiful. She was lying. I was afraid for her when I was old enough to be afraid. That I had made her flicker out too soon, too young.

No, no, he said.

6.

My sister couldn't walk into the hospital where my mother's chest had been cracked open, he said. A hole in her heart and a valve in some chamber needed repair. My mother had shrunk down so far, I could no longer feel who she was. My sister wouldn't even try. My father was a great man then, in that hospital room. I could do nothing except watch his hands, which were my hands. They touched everything. My mother's forehead and hair. To my sister he told jokes, coaxed her like a stray dog and held her hand through the hospital halls until she firmly planted herself in the corner of my mother's room. She took not one breath.

7.

I escaped the babysitter's attention and sat for a day and a night in a sewer with a neighbor's beagle, she said. My mother found me in the sewer not fifteen minutes after she had returned from her trip.

8.

I once slipped into her neighbor's strawberry patch, she said. Me and a girl named Dani Duris ate strawberry after strawberry. When my tongue swelled up, Dani got her father, who rushed us to the hospital. My mother was already there when we arrived because her new boyfriend was a nurse. I didn't know about the boyfriend thing for years.

9.

They remembered: a rabbit once stole our vegetables. A man once stole our music. A hurricane once stole our coast, in Mississippi. So our first move was to a mountain, which boxed us in.

It reminded me of the time my father upended us for one of his dreams, he said. My sister and I learned that he had been married before. We could not conjure his other life. I told my sister they were both liars and we believed me.

Don't compare our life with your old life, she said.

10.

I don't know how to step cleanly away from my mother, she said. And you have the same problem with your father.

They shouted and broke the car and themselves apart over this.

11.

They remembered: burying two dogs, three cats, and killing one deer.

I shot that deer perfect, she said.

I couldn't believe your mother came with us, he said. I wouldn't hold a gun and my face was flushed for days.

We ate the meat when Katrina dropped a tree through our house, they said. The power was gone for three weeks, so we had sex often and feverishly. A red star descended the horizon in the evening, a green one in the morning. A half-inch of water pooled on the kitchen floor. It is impossible to explain how wonderful this was.

12.

Something they tell: we once stole a jon boat from a Kentucky home and rowed it across Lake Cumberland to get to a waterfall. The water was freezing in that fall, even in summer. Our bodies lit up with cold, then heat. We dared to see who could sit in the fall longer. There were no winners, in together, out together. We rowed back and a storm swept over the lake. We argued and yelled and were pushed off course and the boat sagged with water. So many things that we don't remember the how or why, only the effect. Water splashed over the sides of the boat and we put on the lifejackets. We were desperate to put on lifejackets. Then we showed up into ourselves, which is what you do, rowing hard, bailing water. It took a long time, but we hit shore.

Her mother laughed and shook her head, his father said good.

On air

Clayton T. Michaels

It's tempting to imagine that the peroxide curls
of the pretty but insipid talking head
on the local news are sentient, and that
they're just as horrified as I am

whenever they hear her speak with
faux gravitas while describing a scene—
like the roof of a convenience store collapsing
while firefighters attempt to control

the rapidly spreading blaze—that doesn't need
additional dramatizing. I like to think that one
day they'll rebel. Secede from the oppressive
mother-head. And instead of panning over

to the Doppler radar for the latest on some high-
pressure system blowing up from the Florida Keys,
or cutting to the sports desk for the area football
scores, the director will tell the cameraman

to stay tight on the line of disembodied ringlets
slowly making their way across the studio floor.

Tantric

Clayton T. Michaels

I'm only trying to protect myself—

someone keeps jabbing needles
into my eye.

Spiderweb cracks accentuate the red filaments

and she keeps making these sounds
like the whirr of cicadas.

The whole thing's kind of tantric:

makes me want to bury the bones
of a sparrow

near the bend in the river,

tattoo f-shaped sound-holes
over my ribcage,

place a line of salt on every windowsill,
across every doorway,

then melt down the silver
in her tongue

and use it to make rain.

Anodyne

Clayton T. Michaels

Summer came late this year. April's
ebony sheets

of rain spilled over into May.

Now hemlock's coming back
in a big way—

hemlock and purple nightshade,

tainting the groundwater, swelling
our tongues

and changing our accents.

Now when I say *trust* it
sounds like *gun*;

when I say *love* it sounds
like *mycosis*.

[of inserting wing into cunt]

Donald Dunbar

in this season, to what have you given your mind?

of inserting wing into cunt, and of horsing around like kids should, we were treating the wounded. wet and simple. and the forest tuts. and the white doves rise. and mission bells go

will i

will i

no. no and yet instead of airplane was careening out of control, later they participate in the eyeball itches scratch it out. when the orgasm itches scratch it out. perhaps i will remain in the future.

for instance, if there is a heaven it ain't a place for remembering only and utters my whole face poking its nose from the newspaper. her whole face is melting. such beautiful flowers deserve a special water.

perhaps the question was staying warm in an ocean of blood. in this season, who has blessed your heart?

when just sleeping in the grass is enough to make me want to be the center of the earth. most of it is your fault. please sit by me and your heart in love. please sit by me and make your thoughtful sound. but i've learned if i'm not in love, way to go! it's frail and patient. and fortitude for your trials in the coming weeks.

when maybe gracefulness and situationalism aren't always at odds. when really the reason i am here has little to do with your health or your feelings. and opening the trunk on the car should reveal to you and impeach me, i fucking dare you. your lights are on fire and my lights are when i am guided through trees by beings who seem as light but are air. and in this way will i find me once again and in this way questions about questions about. just this once i'd like you to appear to me in your wings and in your robe with one breast hanging out and your heart hanging out.

i'd operate until the whole country was dead, is how i must be.

regardless of the roses, my dear situation. you're just a puppy. and i am all i will ever think about conversation: when i met you and we were in the room upstairs which was rare for that time, and you were looking through my photographs like you belonged in them:

inside of one glass bell is another glass bell entirely invisible through the first:

and in the shell of our breath we will meet in winter and in a fine mood, finding the time for what makes us us. i will tell you about all the nonsense in my head and how i get it all out. of course i will be helping and if you were to use the knife that i gave to you on your birthday to learn how to correctly section a sweet fruit, and just this once no grass in between my teeth and no small intestine welling up in my little heart. in this season, to what have you promised what, and to what have you come, naked and tolerable and ashamed. you are notices and are fragrances and i smell like apples. in this season, when have you taken away, and when i believe you to be the sort of person i wanted to be like when i was a child, who i believed in from the time i could.

i will bless you and then return to the ocean with a heart full of air.

i will keep you hidden in the sand where i will have put you as an egg, and watch you return to the ocean with a heart full of air.

you cannot have this from me, though i would give it to you.

you must respect the inability of my generosity, questions, and frame.

[i present eighty-five words]

Donald Dunbar

i present eighty-five words regarding magic:

which is spicer's last choice, for instance. one can be spicer and another must be another nobody. having a fair amount to say is no guarantee of work, my friend, having a lot to say as in my friend who critiques the water in a glass glass, as it were. noticing nothing nothing in place of flowers and still meeting the retinas to newspaper. it helps me sleep, the article started, so i take it daily and nightly. yes, i take it in the afternoon.

[people think you're famous]

Donald Dunbar

people think you're famous, the
new art is gibberish
and calling to its king [] i am in a molecule way [] but first let's eat or []
masturbating myself through [] wires in the age of gibberish. [] people think
you're famous, first [] let's eat, and then we shall [] make love, getting fucked []
by at least a [] hundred men, getting [] milked by a thai [] shitting on a plate. i've
got [] few other financial [] responsibilities but first [] let's eat, and then [] we
shall make love. people [] think you're more [] beautiful than you are [] for
instance,
let's fill my heart with
air and breathe forever

Innocuously Unstable

Eric Beeny

People only go out to bars in Histogram City so they can yell at each other.
There they can drink and take their bad days out on their best friends who also had really bad days.

They all drink more than one another, come home and take their bad days out on the nights of their families.

They scream at or beat their wives and children for demanding more efficient allocations of balance between time and energy, emotion and responsibility.

But split screens don't exactly focus on the big picture.

Mortimer went to the bar every night after work, got drunker and drunker, yelling louder and louder at his best friends.

As a kind of preemptive measure, he would go to the payphone and call his house.

He would yell at the top of his lungs and those of those around him into the phone.

Not one member of his family, his wife or two or three children, would pick up the phone.

They'd all huddle together behind the couch, listening to it ring.

Mortimer would leave a message, yelling into the machine:

"Hello? ... Please pick up the goddamn phone..."

Mortimer would breathe real heavy.

"I want you safe and gone, alive and well and out of the house before I get home. I love you..."

To Make Matters Worse

Eric Beeny

All the things that happen, all the decisions people make not knowing how things will turn out, how those decisions will affect things that happen after, events which time or people in time haven't come to yet, until it's all over, and there are no more events, when every decision ruined things for the next decision, and so on until the last destroyed everything, and there's [n]othing always then.

But Nothing has a good memory and often thinks back to the good old days, back to when time was still running out, all history crumbling in reverse, the ruins rebuilding themselves all through the ages, back to a time when Mason could do [n]othing but scratch himself.

All Mason's mosquito bites were fresh as a prehistoric apocalypse.

He could only laugh about it now, as crazy as they drove him then.

He tried thinking of anything else: things, other things which weren't the first things he thought of, and then he tried to not think.

He tried shrinking his thoughts of mosquito bites into when the universe was the size of an atom, before it exploded into a flower which would soon bloom so big it would rip itself apart.

He tried to not scratch its galaxies tingling his arms and legs and the back of his neck as they spun his skin like a web around in his thoughts.

He could almost hear them burning.

He felt them evolving, probably inhabited by civilizations with no understanding of healing moisturizer lotion.

Those civilizations evolving, maybe, maybe that's what all itched—

The buildings going up, experiments in transportation, drilling for oil, deforestation, nuclear war...

All Mason knew was his fresh mosquito bites were driving him crazy.

They itched all.

Mason squirted a few pumps of healing moisturizer lotion into his palm and spread it out onto his arms and legs and the back of his neck.

He began talking to his body:

"You're all going to die," he laughed.

"Murderer," his body itched back.

"Don't rub it in," Mason said, spreading the lotion.

The Uncouth Swain

Greg Gerke

Memory is my home. I sing and rot at the same time. The declivities, the eastern kettles and drumlins I visit at the end of summer with Phenobarbital spritzers knocking in my bruised rucksack. The air is grouchy and I love to pet the grass and swing little, slimy frogs by their legs and shout Baudelaire at them.

My notebooks are soiled and worn, but empty. I've made some decisions lately that remain fresh up top next to the mush about nuns and penmanship. First—I will do away with the wires, but after I reach Knott's fork. Second—Chimpanzee will be reclaimed when I use 'durst' in a real sentence with a real stranger. Last—trade for another spoon.

I went out of feeling when the green hairs grew from my ears. Tympanum shuddered and I was below. A foundling. My mistress might twitch if I caught her in the oven. She had a bunch of health questions and signals gone wrong after we moved to the triplex with Billy. Billy told me I had the wrong idea about women. Why I threw the barrel of basmati at him is only known to the angels. He went north, the asshole—liked cold and fires and things that did not talk. If I am mawkish, Billy is my greatest regret. My mistress could be anyone, anything. A pencil, a crumpled sock, my little finger.

When warmed, I follow sparrows to the river. I gurgle and ooze underwater—my tears mean enough to drown just after birth. In the long kingdom I have found so many pennies and screws it is ridiculous. Never nails, never newspapers. I'm of a sound weight because of my metals, and I dally into regions that would normally not have me because I have hypochondrias to share and because no one can stand to lick my bones.

When they finalize me I want to go back and touch a man. He doesn't have to be ruddy or spiky. He can be foreign, belly-swollen, toe-gnarled. I won't use his ears, but I'll slip him my heart and he can know that I wasn't kidding, there was a circular charm where my wishing used to be. Me and him—we'll go somewhere far. It'll be like getting out of school on a winter afternoon. We'll meander towards home and potatoes holding pinkies and feeling good because tomorrow is more of the same.

But that is before the unbloom. Now the sun is falling and I'm spinning. I'm not yet eaten out; I'm faulty—holding onto the ribbons for too long.

I don't have a chance.

In Afternoon, He Finds a Box

Heather Napualani Hodges

It commuted,
tiny box, this.

The boy could hold it
with twin hands,

each a replica
of the other

left, left,
to turn would be
the method of any

circle.

When he shook it
voices came to the room:

small insects of noise,
a persimmon fell outside

startling the colony of children
who had gathered.

Not knowing any other way
to combat their fear,
they began to clap wildly inside the room

just so they could hear
the sound
of hands coming back.

The box remained very still,
thinking of what to name these
small supple gods.

Contents.

Sullen Composure

Heather Napualani Hodges

Composed here
small space

of the even smaller room
to be collapsed inside.

(Pair of warm nylon hands)

Among the work of skin,
pressed dead flowers, private moorings,

where the glass of water sits next to me,
and sits next to me, it sits sits,

the loyalty hinged on a nectared thing.
(No mouth)

How terrible,
there was no room for teeth,
no space large enough for the white-broken whale to rest its anger

the animal lifted its skirts and walked across the porch to the rabbit's tiny door,
and you thought this was a waltz: clumsy crisis.
This was merely taffeta.

The fallen orchestra took its measurements and handed itself to you in parts, in
movements, genres, squalid impersonations of the half-eaten men who did nothing
more than sit in their cages and chew.

You, giving it all grace,

proposing the toast to anyone who had ever lost you.

I, raising my thick hand,
then, exhausted,
placing it gently
in the bedside drawer.

Landscaped

Heather Napualani Hodges

To the left,
chinese landscape
and no porcelain around him.

Simple trains outrunning very small people,
the dead walls of an orchard,
the pulled skin of a whale,
they boy pointing to his collected shapes.

There are ways we all collapse.
Our faces fold abruptly up into their pleats,
and no one notices how
each step was placed
delicate by the heel,
by its tiny walnut mind
by its tiny prawn arms.

Premeditation of a dynasty.

Things were timed, flailing the way they did.
We filled entire jars full of oysters, decadent pastries, first-born daughters.

We capped and shook, let sit.

It is easy to be epic.

We preserve all the wrong things.

Each landscape drawn precisely onto the turning body.
We merit looking.

Playing With Guns

Howie Good

My mother was twelve when she went to work.
She cut lace in a dress factory after school.
Her boss was a Greek named Mike,
and at the end of the week,
my grandfather would pocket her pay.

How often I heard about it growing up,
a puzzling parable in which children
playing with guns figured vaguely
and the moon was missing its lower jaw.

Red Leaves

Howie Good

You can phone the police,
but they won't come,

even as evening trembles
on the edge of the roof,

and after a while,
you yourself

may begin to doubt
what you saw.

Don't.

Near where the hunters
park their pickups,

and shadows bloom
in the normal course of things,

the leaves are like birthdays
and thank you's,

only they're bleeding.

Tuberculosis

J. Bradley

Cecil unzipped his smile. “Why are you here,” he swooped, “It’s one-thirty in the morning. Do you want me to ruin you like a refugee camp? Again?” My underwear knotted into a fist.

I wanted to break his teeth like the glass in a house of reptiles, extract the tar from his lungs like fudge then feed it to unattended children willing to say “yes, please”. I wanted panic to blossom from his cheeks; it would make such a lovely bouquet.

I fell through Cecil’s door like an abandoned smoke stack. When I clawed my way out, the sun scolded my spine.

Everything In My Childhood Was Quiet

Louise Norlie

When my mother was replaced, I kept asking the new one which one she was. I knew this would confuse her because, from her perspective, she was the only one, the real one.

This question annoyed her, and I enjoyed annoying her so I asked it over and over. Since everything in my childhood was quiet, she clearly heard the question, but pretended she didn't – as if the surrounding silence acted like a kind of buffer. Meanwhile, her face grew tiny lines of disturbance.

Finally, one night, I snuck into her room with a flashlight and pointed it into her face. She opened her eyes and stared straight up, pretending not to see me.

“So, just which one are you?” I asked again. The disturbance lines on her face deepened, branching out like a web cutting into the flesh. I touched her skin and it felt as parched as sandpaper. Her eyes were wide, unblinking. Her lips rustled like dry leaves, asking if I wanted her to crack. There were always these power games between us, hurling volleys of guilt and blame.

My real mother when she was my current age: (me). Later, something descended and clamped its wings around her.

Whenever I tell someone about how everything in my childhood was quiet, they become extremely uncomfortable. I tell them this in person so that I can witness their reactions. It just isn't as honest telling them over the phone, neither for them nor for me. So I watch as their eyes glaze over. They nervously rub their hands together. Then they impatiently massage their thighs with their palms. They stop returning my phone calls soon after and never reply to my e-mails.

I tell them of my silent house, the tall sepulchral windows with the breath-frosted glass that I tapped for noise, finding none. How I slapped the walls for an echo until my hands hurt. How I combed my hair across my face and blew through it, pretending I heard the wind through the willows. In the absence of sound I learned to read, but I didn't know how many of the words were spoken. Words like “abacus,” for example. And “xylophone.”

When the windows of my silent house were open and I held my breath, I thought I heard the moon rise through the sky with a creak. I had a dog but it lay completely still and never barked, so at first I suspected it was a carpet. I loved to stroke its silky warmth. Carpets are not naturally warm. This is how I knew it was a dog.

I didn't go to school until I was a teenager.

Even now I am confused about many things.

My replacement mother collected pillows and built walls with them. Each room in the house was divided up into multiple sub-rooms by these towering pillow walls. I climbed them until they collapsed, exhaling feathers that creamed the air. I

swam through the foam, which breathed through me in microscopic feather bubbles. My veins made a smooth shushing sound like cars driving on snow.

When I emerged from the foam, my ears and nose stuffed, my body had become more brittle. My bones, for example. The extended period of weightlessness hollowed them out. When I tried to walk on solid ground both my femurs snapped from the pressure. Then I broke the antique chandelier with my crying. The glass wasn't used to such loud noise.

After a long recovery – years — in a nearby clinic, I saw my mother's replacement for the last time. She was in the clinic too, but for different reasons.

"Come closer," her finger weakly beckoned from the bed. "My blood has stopped flowing."

I pressed my thumb against her wrist and felt a pulse, clearly and firmly beating. This was life, I thought, albeit a replacement life.

"Everything is such a hoax," I said, snot-nosed little cynic that I was.

She sighed and turned her head to the wall.

"You never loved me," she whispered.

When I walked away I heard my footsteps, faint at first, then coming through loud and clear.

Family Story #33

Marvin K. Mooney

Fucking fuckers fucking little symbols eat equations and questionnaires and pedigrees while president Obama makes face catch a thousand swords knowing carnal little yodels, yodels, frantic little margarine telephones televisions and capitalized specimens. The president of the united spaces of independence eats a meatloaf.

Women whose eyes are water to drink in prison make holy oak of imposter liaison. Liaisons, plural? Who cares, this is not grammar lesson. The common unclean nightflowers do grow in twos and threes and how I wish to deceive the mortuary before grandmother gets home from the hospital. Father forgets his med pills make quick salad and redeye vacation tapioca. Dinner menus and Saturday nights mean nothing in case you mean to graft the licorice of starvation onto the glued hand of obedience anyway.

What you stack whole money hunger waving goodbye grandma, see you grandma, hope you get to feeling better while you still got time to re-up the line and forecast the disagreement between you and dad and fridge and mohair and frankly I think the whole thing is out of sight out of mind out of dynamite.

These allergic reactions. You see? Ask the foundation to grapple with wonderful additions to the aviary or twice now I have called your mother for advice and she hangs up on me! Fucking hangs up on me when I yell out the chess piece makes fourteen haven lockets yellowed by quartz and dagger burger needlepoint excursions. Blood soup. Noodles jury kluge bucket. Radically! Ecstatically! I ambition the frosting and cake the ghouls pleasantly.

Walking spiral hunger grape forage sister wood lawn hyper fragile stabile anyway I hope you get this message. I miss you, squirrel. I miss your language. I miss the way you make bake sake rake fake take Columbus.

4 Seconds

M.E. Parker

Cyril has lost his head. His awareness of such convinces him that he is missing not his head but his body, a body now flailing about, unburdened by consciousness, uninhibited, free from the manacles of reason; a body whose liberation Cyril's head has come to envy in the nanoseconds since its separation.

The moment of detachment is an evaporating illusion, a miasma of cold breath. Only the echo of ripping metal remains after the world slipped from its axis and a rainbow-colored stream of mercury swirled down an earthen drain, the finalization of the divorce of Cyril's head from his body, cleaner somehow, more permanent than his other divorce. Cyril's head is now an empty room, so cold the room, a stove bereft of coal. Wife, children, dog, car, words curling away from their definitions like Cyril's body from his head, have dissipated, leaving a single cogent thought—a thunderhead, and then thoughts rain from the sky in yellow sheets.

Forever falling, a base-jump without a parachute, repeatedly crashing through the ground, Cyril's head drains down its pierless mooring lines into pools of aspic eaten by crows with the faces of children, his children, or maybe the children he never had but should have. His eyes slide behind a rice paper screen of bluing vacuous arteries, aching for darkness, a basketball hitting the rim, bouncing off the backboard, so close to slipping into the net, needing only a nudge, a breath of air to tip it into the hole. But it teeters on the edge instead, flirting with the net, playing hard to get in an endless seduction.

Lips shaking, Cyril draws a phantom breath as a velvet purse cinches him up in purple silence. White fluttering birds, like the ones released at his wedding, blast out of a blunderbuss, their wings tapering into flapping knives as they perch on his ears, their motors humming, roaring, the smell of gasoline on their breath.

Cyril gets no replay of his finer moments. His life does not flash before his eyes as he so gullibly expected; there is only a woman who might be his wife, or perhaps the woman he wanted to be his wife, holding a baby, his baby, or a bowling ball inscribed with his name, endless gutter balls, baby crying. She is also sobbing, the woman, yelling, swinging a golf club at a troop of marching mollusks wearing tennis shoes and Cyril's equations, the ones that tirelessly failed him, finally solved, a jumble of hands and legs and breasts where the Greek alphabet should be.

Orbiting eddies of red and green, Cyril's head, now free for the first time in years from the cancer in his body, floats on a gasoline breeze, relief, a sharp break from the mutated cells that have kept his head on a raceway made of chocolate mud. The bright light finally giving way to the midnight blackness of a crescent-moon Sunday at the lake where he learned to fish with his grandfather. The reflections of the marina lights along the pier, oblong yellow corpses of light, twinkle into the shape of faces he recognizes.

Cyril is a lone gear moved beyond the reach of the teeth in the surrounding gears, spinning slower, doing no work, waiting for rotation to finally stop. Beneath the ebb of the last heartbeat his body gave him before the split, a rumble, a boat horn or a bus, builds, humming ever louder, noise as white light so thunderous it blinds him. Cyril's head yearns to clasp his hands over his ears. The noise grows louder still, eyes trembling until they pop open. Thought blindness. Starfield.

Hunt Her, Gather Her

Molly Gaudry

Their ruins under droop-heavy branches buckle
beneath clouds, creaking wind; and how beautiful,
like the body of a soft ripe girl. Hunt her, gather her.
Bring her at dusk to the city of rain; under an awning
of branches take her, push her into the soft dark earth.
Lift that deerskin skirt. And when the huts cave in,
crumpled straw and mud; when footprints swirl under
river surge: deep plunge, open-eyed search. Grasp.
Release. Resurface. Return to the city of sidewalks,
sneakers, stop signs; sideburns fluffed, seek new prey.

Paranoia

Neila Mezynski

Thick air, well-intentioned misfits and reefer smoke. You could find her stuffed under the bed, in a closet, laundry hamper, haystack. Invisible. It would wear off, they said. Brought out the worst. Who they. What fun. She ran down the street buck naked. Not much of a party person, she said.

Phobic

Neila Mezynski

She stood in the doorway fully dressed. He was looking at her. I can't go. Come on let's go. Locked. Can't go. Okay, I'll go alone. He said. Quiet. The door closed. Herself. The old man. Self. Frozen. Plums, peach pies and baking. Together. Painting, anniversaries. All that he did, didn't. Unlock the door. My door. Your brain. Breathe. You'll see someone else. Fists don't breathe. Your purple sweater, he likes purple, to see it. Your painting. His painting. The old man. C'mon. They don't bite. No. I'll stay and shoot myself in the foot.

Ricky Garni

I counted 97 grey hairs on my head today. I didn't have to go to work so I could do it very slowly. In fact, at one point, I lost count and said "Damn it!" although I do not generally curse; but there was no one at home and so I could say "Damn it!" and so I laughed a little afterwards and said it again. "DAMN IT!" I said, really loud this time. I could do that because I live in the country; my nearest neighbor lives over 3 miles away: who would be offended? The cows in the field next to my house might very well be; I have never had a chance to count them, so, since I was fired from my job today, I thought, "Why not?" And then I said, "Damn it!" really loud again, and started to cry. I cried because I thought, "My wife is dead." People loved to curse at my old job, and I won't even cry like a baby, usually. Five trees outside my window, twelve shards of glass underneath my window, four clouds in the sky, a chocolate bar in my pocket. One cow in particular has what I would like to call "a real attitude." "Don't," I admonish, "point that schnoz at me!" Mr. Cow, or, if you prefer, Ms. Cow. Apropos of that, nine drops of blood on the floor. Mom used to say, Do Something For Yourself. It's good advice. I like to take it. Now what? Fourteen drops of blood on the floor. I do five things for myself every day. I never buy hair dye. Live and Let Live is my motto. Accentuate The Positive. Twenty drops of blood on the floor. What would I say if she were here? Late at night, it is so peaceful, I think I can hear the sound of whistling. It's as though Huck Finn is whistling. He's whistling, but naw, he's not. I think I thought so, because he is so lonely. And he has grown old over the years. It's so quiet out. Damn it. Goddamn it. Now it's thirty. For the record, there are over 20 cows in the field next to my house. 40.

Station

R L Swihart

A charred clock tower with golden wings. The old booking hall (embers of Art Nouveau) now a *kavárna*

He rummages for his ticket. Sees cities clicking into existence on the big board

He follows the sign for the WC but the trail peters out into a dank hallway and a crumbling stair

In the Burger King: U2 overkill and the wiry expat with Dawkins' *Delusion*

On the platform a young girl with flowers: blue-white, white-blue

De Selby is surprisingly silent on the subject

R L Swihart

In the local library the stereotypical librarian was chattering away to a nibbling circle of children. In the seminary library an old professor was removing heretical books from the shelves, while a young professor, on the heels of the old professor, was removing the rest.

Meanwhile, across town in the Church of the Invisible Cross, three stray cats had broken in and made a mess of the elder's morning milk. From the elder's perspective there was no other recourse: he allowed them to lap it up.

In the coming days, the three cats would repeat the act again and again (with an eerie similitude).

At some point the break-in was accepted, and was carried off like clockwork, so the cats would arrive and beeline to a bowlful of milk.

Soon the plastic bowl became a ceramic bowl. Then the ceramic bowl became a silver bowl. By the time the silver bowl was replaced with a golden bowl, the elder had left the church and catered only to his cats.

The Plagiarist Checks Out

Ryan Ridge

The midget concierge coughs as the inkjet commences copying an itemized statement regarding my financial debt to the five-star Seabottom Casino & Aqua Resort, where I've been hiding out ever since the dual accusations of Obscenity and Plagiarism tarnished my pen name and forced me underwater, like the rest of the pseudo-celebrity fugitives I've met at the hotel karaoke bar. There's something about this concierge (maybe how his eyebrows are lined like freshly-mowed lawns? or the way his mouth resembles the nozzle of a garden hose?) that makes him come across as comical, yet ominous—a koala bear hypnotized by halogen beams. Despite his diminutive stature, this little man has a strange power over me, especially with his buddy Rodney – the extra-large bouncer – lurking nearby. I can't see Rodney, but I can sense him.

The concierge twirls his tiny thumbs on the marble countertop. "One moment," he sneers through his snide mustache.

Moments accumulate and add up to nothing.

I try counting backwards from infinity, but the second number keeps eluding me: "Infinity... Shit... Infinity... Shit... Infinity..."

Now he passes me my receipt as if it were a viral infection. My heart beats like a coked up drum machine; burns like a trick birthday candle. Holy fuck am I fucked! Two thousand dollars worth of handjobs from the staff masseuse. Hundreds of losing two-dollar exacta bets with the casino's electronic bookie. Not to mention the charges for the repeat long-distance phone calls to my publisher in New York and my analyst in Great Falls. Plus room and board.

Yes, it appears everything checks out, but the question remains: will I?

*

I'm hoping that the new manuscript in my duffel bag will solve everything. After all, it's a (me)moir and my publisher assures me that the market is ripe for this sort of detritus. I mean, I did a fairly excellent job of blaming my parents for my current plight. I'm thinking Best Seller List, Book of the Month Club stuff. Like the old days.

O to be atop the Best Seller List again!

What I remember, I remember fondly. Crazy nights turned into crazy days that turned into crazy nights. Wild, wild times! After my debut novel, "The Phantom Asshole of Akron, Ohio," sold two million strong, I reined as King of the NYC Cocktail Circuit.

Parties: I wore a paper crown cut from the Norton Anthology of Literature, a corduroy suit with velour smoker's patches appended to the sleeves, monogrammed ascots, and Cormac McCarthy's old cowboy boots, which I purchased on eBay for a

small fortune. I even put a pirate patch over my right eye – à la James Joyce – and affected a slight Irish accent. Yes, in my mind, I'd become the literary lion that every bearded dude in an Iowa City pub envisions becoming.

Q: How did I spend my leisure time?

A: Mostly approximating Hemingway.

I maimed antelopes in the Serengeti, caught ginormous marlins off the coast of Sarasota, and when I appeared on Oprah I charmed the panties off the studio audience and got invited back. Received fan letters from legions of Soccer Moms. Jerked off into champagne flutes in the backs of limos. Scaled Mount Everests of cocaine. The entire time, I don't recall ever once lighting my own cigarette or paying for a drink in any Manhattan bar, especially the KGB.

Those were the days!

Eventually, things settled down after I married my charming publicist, Annie. We bought a ranch in Montana and I set to work writing the Great American Novella! © (Sure, the Great American Novel had already been written a dozen times over, but not the novella. No one had written the Great American Novella! ©) However, before I started on the novella, I penned an award-winning collection of Erotic Flash Fiction for posterity. Little did I know that that book would force me underwater to gaze at sharks through plexi-glass portholes and contemplate one hundred suicides while watching ostracized outlaws sing karaoke in the lounge by beer-light. So little.

*

A Muzak version of "5 to 1" leaks from tinny speakers, hidden somewhere in the pressurized lobby, and I'm struck by simultaneous urges to go grocery shopping and joyriding in an elevator. The midget is busy refiguring my bill, punching numbers into a pocket calculator.

I turn and greet a couple of Big Name Renegades by their underwater aliases as they pass by en route to the Milli Vanilli Lounge. You'd be surprised by the former status of some of the fugitives who have taken rooms here.

One man, we'll call him Charlie, used to be the coroner of L.A. County before the Feds caught him posting autopsy photos of dead actors on the internet.

Another, a bare-footed NFL kicker named Scotty, had been excommunicated from his hometown for missing seven game-winning field goals in a single season.

Even though my own crime of Psychic Plagiarism got dismissed in a televised trial (a Court TV exclusive) the severity of the charges were enough to capsize my career and cast me here, into this under-imagined place, like the wreckage of an obscure battleship.

I feel like an aimless torpedo, which is an improvement.

*

The midget glares at me with IRS eyes and I know I'm screwed the second he says, "Sir, these numbers are legit."

I attempt to speak, fail, and attempt again. Nothing.
In the Milli Vanilli Lounge, a Chinese diplomat croons:

“5 to 1, baby, 1 to 5
No one here gets out alive.”

A smile betrays my face as I hand him a cancelled credit card, hoping against hope against hope. I watch as the American Express charges forward like a doomed cavalry.

In the Milli Vanilli Lounge, a former lingerie model – her chiseled face marred by airbrush scars, her half-eaten Adam’s apple – sings a Stone Temple Pilots song out of key:

“I’m half the man I used to be.”

*

Before my career spontaneously combusted, I’d been living in Great Falls, Montana, working on the Great American Novella! © Things were ideal. I’d type away feverishly for consecutive days. My dear, sweet Annie brought me cucumber sandwiches and wiped away the ammunition of sweat from my brow with a washcloth. Then we’d make love and afterwards eat chocolate chip cookies. Then, out of nowhere, came the obscenity charges: career-ending accusations brought against me by The Mothers Against Sons Against Daughters Against Fathers Who are Turned On by the Slightest Appearance of Vulgarity. In addition to being obscene, they claimed that I was a psychic plagiarist. They said my O. Henry Award-winning collection of Erotic Flash Fiction, “Backseats Were Made for This”, had been telepathically stolen from the collective wet dreams of teenaged sons with Romance Novelist mothers.

Oprah invited back me on her show, only to chastise me on national TV and smash my literary rep into a million little pieces. My vast housewife readership rioted in the suburbs. They filled their SUVs with my books and flooded en masse to soccer fields, where they burnt them by the thousand. Soon my beautiful wife became my vindictive ex when she served me a Cleveland Steamer of divorce papers and a half-decade of tax forms she’d neglected to file. And to think that before the Feds seized my Montana ranch I’d surpassed Rick Bass as the Greatest Living Writer, Living In Montana, From Somewhere Else.

*

Now, after the credit card company denies me, the midget snaps his fingers and says, “Rodney. Oh Rodney...”

Rodney, the remarkably robust bouncer, soon emerges from a column of plastic palm trees by the casino.

He leads me down the hallway, through a dark corridor, and into the men's room.

Once inside, I receive a series of swirlies so severe I begin to cry.

The last thing I remember is Rodney ripping a paper towel dispenser off the wall and hitting me once, then twice...

And I'd be dishonest if I claimed my last words were original. Like so many last words, they were obligatory.

Why, I must've asked why.

Letter from Tomorrow's Traffic Jam

Scott Riley Irvine

Concerned, overloaded individual; with burlap eyes and a stiff leather jacket, Psalm-ber pangs and a distant spouse; your car seats smell of the grey, plastic gas station vacuum that cleans them off each night; rich blends and whipped creams are festooned along the highway, their chipped stems planted in the empty farmland; orange juice burns your chapped lips and the pulp will linger with the dips in your gums; daylight is synonymous with sickness and the office lights are so bright; when you return home, you can't help but notice your child crackles like the face of a television.

Concerned, overloaded individual –,

Salida is an exit, so don't be afraid to take it. It owns its disregard in the silence of an airplane, pointing to sealed doors, tethered to *Exit*. You wonder about their relationship, but only briefly: *Who would I be if I preferred the other over the only Exit I've ever known? Would my eyebrows furrow the same? Would they furrow at all? How tall would I be? Would I still worry about how much I sleep?* On the ground, tomorrow's traffic is today's traffic. Today's was yesterday's and yesterday knows of tomorrow. Powdered Flavoring. You wrestle with your steering wheel, but only until you can kick at the gas pedal. And the day moves on accordingly.

The smell of salmon reminds you of the way salmon smell. Uphill rivers and bears swiping at the water is scenery for the television to imagine. The mind moves in folds and this is not an origami rose. Steps are numbers and indentured distances from. Brilliant Blue. The hike up ... the climb-in, the man lifting himself in to the cab of an eighteen-wheeler as you watch him from the rest stop, from the parking lot of the rest stop, all diagonal lines and designated alignment, smooth flat and what is a hill except what's in the distance. What's on the inside except what is not on the outside? Nothing is beyond the outside except what the inside believes is being hidden from it. Aspartame, Ace-K and Saccharin.

Your son wonders why the car smells the way it does: why does it daddy, why what? oh and so on – chuckle lightly in the respite until he shares that if teal, those brilliant animated seas or the iris of his favorite cartoon character, had a smell *that that that* this car, teal would smell like this car. One day he'll look upon the default wallpaper of an antique computer with the same revelry, or the bandanas draped from the pockets of boys on Castro Street. Sucrose Fructose Glucose. Well put, ma boy, one day soon your flighty observances and enthusiastic tongue will numb, one day they'll hold themselves tighter, sour and conscientious, manners will supersede mania and if you feel overwhelmed, well, then institutionalized dissuasion will know in a hurry.

Concerned, overloaded individual –,

You wake prematurely for work a few times a week. Internal clock, have to take a piss. French doors for a cigarette, and sometimes a train or two running along

the horizon beyond the tufts of smoke and breath lingering in the ripe morning light. Potassium Bromate. The sun rises and cars start moving. A photographer is exiting the old department store down the street, walking back inside, fiddling with the lighting and placement of his enlargements in the window. His weeklong showcase begins tonight – oh and so on ... the inside's concern for arrangement, the outside's concern for view. Why does it daddy? Ice seals the driver-side door shut, ease over the gearshift from the passenger seat. The windshield wipers are frozen idle, but you'll let the afternoon tend to that. You forgot your breath follows you inside your car. And the day moves on accordingly.

Sodium Nitrate. The hike up ... the climb-in. Flirting with exertion, back among the crumbs. The rest stop parking lot and its scenery of small chores. Light-footed children in a circle of stalls and sinks, sopping and bright, stench circumambient and unrelenting like air conditioning. Mothers, fathers listless; trash tires and glare; stone tables for a garden somewhere, held in purgatory for fleeting use, dulcet anchors for the pale green grass and pavement, the choir of hungry dogs in hot cars.

Your son questions the movement of a coral snake easing between the low trees in the backyard: why can't it ride straight? where's its tail? what's the end? where's it go? oh and so on – chuckle lightly in the respite until he shares that if your car, smells like teal smells like your car, that if your car lost its front tire, its left-front tire, *that that that* it would move like a coral snake, swerve between other cars like the snake in the backyard. BHA. BHT. One day he'll absentmindedly knick a curb or dip into an unavoidable pothole, run a flat on a sleeted street, carry a trail of flung ice and the smell of singed rubber, find a telephone pole looming in the headlit nearness. Well put, ma boy, one day soon your mercurial itinerary and Crayola liturgies will smooth, one day they'll settle, compass and orbit, discouragement will circumvent creativity and if you feel unstimulated, well, then – oh and so on...

Dear concerned, overloaded individual –,

The boys and the girls are muttering in their intermingling clusters. Their school's pavement docks aside the parking lot. You wait for the crowds to clear, for your son to let himself through. He could very well know where you are, where your car is sitting in the scurrying color-wheel, the small greens and large whites, the insistent reorienting on the permanent black expanse. He could very well know, but, as he emerges, there seems no haste to his destination. His direction is slight; those around him move with the same gradual preserve, hurried in only remaining unhurried, meticulous to those who pass with a hello, married to the scene's capsized culmination. He may pass a remark on what he learned, file through his backpack and throw a stack of graded papers in your lap. Will the car still smell like teal? Who knows when we grow out of our unique senses. That vivid commotion will resolve and he will unfasten from the hypodermic; lines and processions are external and what is a chain except a succession of links – unbroken, cold, and secure. What is it daddy? And for once you can't chuckle and explain.

Contributors' biographies

Adam Braffman currently lives and writes in Austin, Texas.

Adam Gallari has long hair because he was young and impressionable when he saw Daniel Day-Lewis in *The Last of the Mohicans*. He currently lives by a train station in Exeter, England, where he is pursuing his PhD, working on a novel and listening to train whistles blowing in the wind. His work has appeared in *Fifth Wednesday Journal*, *anderbo.com*, and his debut collection, *We Are Never as Beautiful as We Are Now*, will be published by Ampersand Books in 2010.

Adam Marston doesn't know if he's a fiction writer or a poet. He has piles of words though, like lots of breadcrumbs stacked together that look like a loaf in the right light. They've been eaten at Dogzplot and Laura Scott's VIPs on VSF and are forthcoming at *The Northville Review* and *elimae*.

Alan Rossi has some publications in places like *Ninth Letter* and *Storyglossia*. He's staring out a window right now at this kudzu overgrown tree, but he's not really seeing that tree, he's seeing the back of his mind, which is telling him with great visual acuity: eat lunch, eat lunch.

Clayton T. Michaels is a teacher, poet, and musician whose poems have or will soon appear in *Slipstream*, *Makeout Creek*, *The Chiron Review*, *Anti-* and *The Prism Review*. He currently teaches first-year writing and comic book courses at Indiana University South Bend. You can find him online at (till human voices wake us and we drown).

Donald Dunbar lives in Portland, Oregon, in a house that has the initials GDFC. There, he co-curates the reading series *If Not For Kidnap Poetry*. In the last year he has cooked over 20 different kinds of vegetable, which is a whole lot more than last year. He often feels optimistic and light-hearted. He also has different information at his website, spare the.

Eric Beeny is the author of *The Dying Bloom (Pangur Ban Party)*. His work has or will appear in *The Adirondack Review*, *LITnIMAGE*, *Matchbook*, *PANK*, *Pear Noir!*, and others. He's a contributing editor for Gold Wake Press. His blog is *Dead End on Progressive Ave*.

Greg Gerke lives in New York. He is in a sublet with no windows and cockroaches. This doesn't make the writing easier. There's *Something Wrong With Sven*, a book of short fiction, has been published by Blaze Vox Books. His website is *greggerke.com*.

Heather Napualani Hodges is currently attempting to uncup cupped things. There is a certain inertia in the spilling—reminiscent of milk.

Howie Good, a journalism professor at the State University of New York at New Paltz, is the author of 12 poetry chapbooks. He has been nominated four times for a Pushcart Prize and five times for the Best of the Net anthology. His first full-length book of poetry, *Lovesick*, was released in 2009 by Press Americana.

J. Bradley is the author of *Dodging Traffic* (Ampersand Books, 2009). He lives at Failure Loves Company.

Louise Norlie's publications have cropped up like lazy but persistent weeds here and there, most recently in *Gloom Cupboard*, *decomp*, *otoliths* and *Nefarious Muse*. Her writing will also be included in the *Quantum Genre on the Planet of the Arts* anthology from *Crossing Chaos - Enigmatic Ink*. Meanwhile, she has been putting in her time in a bureaucratic cubicle, where she shuffles papers and pushes buttons deep within the belly of a large building. Visit her blog at louise-norlie.blogspot.com.

Marvin K. Mooney is not who you think he is.
Join us: themarvinkmooneysociety.com.

M.E. Parker is a writer, a reader, an editor, a web designer, and a carpenter who imagines a world of wooden computers with leather-bound keyboards. His short fiction has recently seen daylight in numerous print publications and internet haunts including *42Opus*, *Alimentum*, *The Briar Cliff Review*, *Electric Velocipede*, *Flint Hills Review*, *The MacGuffin*, *Night Train*, *Quercus Review*, *Smokelong Quarterly* and *Red Fez*, among others.

Molly Gaudry is outside listening to neighbors scream, feeling happy she's not a screamer, despite the frazzled nature of her hair, which might suggest otherwise at the present moment. See her hair at mollygaudry.blogspot.com.

Neila Mezynski is a dancer/choreographer turned abstract painter/writer. She has fiction and poetry published or forthcoming in *Snow Monkey*, *Word Riot*, *Mud Luscious*, *Rumble*, *Zygote In My Coffee*, *Apt*, *Foundling Review*, *Everyday Poet* and *Scrambler*, among several others.

Ricky Garni is a graphic designer who moved from 105 Fidelity Street Apt B-17 to 105 Fidelity Street Apt B-35 and is still suffering a little from culture shock: "The areas seems the same at first, but there are nuances in the languages that differ in subtle ways, and you have to be careful what you say, especially with the elders of the village in this region." Mr. Garni sighs. "I don't think I will ever get used to slurping my soup or the way they treat animals over here. Sometimes I miss my old life..."

R L Swihart currently lives in Long Beach, CA and teaches high school mathematics in Los Angeles. His background is scattered: Engineering, Education, Ancient Near Eastern Literature. His poems have appeared in various online and print journals, including Mimesis, Barnwood, and Bateau.

Ryan Ridge lives in Southern California. He has work in or coming from The Collagist, PANK, The Los Angeles Review, Juked, The Mississippi Review, Wigleaf, and others. He edits the fiction and non-fiction at FAULTLINE Journal of Art & Literature.

Scott Riley Irvine is a young writer presently living and studying in Atlanta. He watches trains from his bedroom window and has a fervent desire to jump aboard one someday in the future. He associates himself and his time set aside for writing with a few sad cafés, but ultimately stays up much too late so that he may write in sleepy delirium.

Forthcoming



“Writing is a process of dealing with not-knowing, a forcing of what and how ... The not-knowing is crucial to art, is what permits art to be made.”

The sixth issue of > kill author, named after Donald Barthelme (1931-1989), will be published in early April. Submit your work to us, whether it's poetry, prose, postmodernism or some other literary endeavor beginning with the letter P.